

## **Oral History Program: Biographical Notes**

**Geoffrey Charles VERGE (1932 - )**

### **Civil Engineer**

- Birth & Family:** Born 1932, Nagambie, Central Victoria. Father owned a small garage, acquired several more, eventually expanded into trucking, carting, earthmoving and property, and became a wealthy man. Mother was of Swiss descent.
- One older brother.
- Education:** Attended primary school at the local convent. Commenced boarding school aged 10, and matriculated at 16. Won a scholarship to Newman College. Achieved an Exhibition in Hydraulics.
- Qualifications:** BCE (Hons) Melbourne University 1955, MBA Macquarie University, Grade 1 Arbitrator – IAMA and IE Aust.
- Memberships:** Fellow, Institution of Engineers Australia,  
Fellow, American Society of Civil Engineers,  
Fellow, Institution of Civil Engineers,  
Fellow, Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators Australia
- Awards:**
- Work History:** After graduation, Verge went to London and obtained a job with Sir William Halcrow & Partners, Civil Engineers, London, in 1955. Worked in the Special Projects Section doing smaller jobs and feasibility studies for very large jobs. His first job was the investigation, designing and drafting of a fish ladder for a dam in Galway, Western Ireland.
- Next was the design and construction of automatic floodgates for the London Underground Railway Stations (*tautology*). He also worked on an Esso pipeline in Southampton.
- After a year, Verge went to Montreal in Canada, where he accepted a position with C D Howe, Consultants, designing large grain silos and shipping galleries at Montreal harbour.
- Verge returned to Australia in 1957 and was appointed lecturer in Civil Engineering at the (then) Caulfield Institute of Technology in the inaugural year of the course, developing and teaching all subjects.
- In 1960 he obtained a position with Scott & Furphy Consultants, and was primarily concerned with the hydraulics and structural designing of sewerage treatment works. Within six months he was promoted to Personal Assistant to Harry Furphy, the Senior Partner, supervising a group of design engineers and fieldwork. He was also responsible for investigation, design, construction inspections and contract administration, of roads, drainage, water supply and waste water projects for many Victorian municipalities.

Verge also acted for Harry Furphy in his absence, attending meetings with authorities, making monthly reports on costs and progress, handling contractors and contract administration.

In 1963, anxious for speedy advancement, he accepted a position as Associate Director and Melbourne Branch Manager with Kinnaird Hill deRohan & Young, a young group from Adelaide under the aegis of Professor Bull of Adelaide University, that wanted to expand into Melbourne. Working in a completely new field, Verge led a group of engineers on the design of offices, factories, process buildings, steel and concrete structures. This required working closely with architects, as well as being involved in adventurous projects, whilst working under great pressure to ensure the optimum use of time and resources.

In 1965 he joined the Cement & Concrete Association as Divisional Manager to set up their office in Melbourne where he was responsible for operations in both Victoria and Tasmania. After eighteen months he moved to Head Office in Sydney as Chief Engineer, and was responsible for research and development in concrete design and structural applications, as well as education and technical advisory services. The Association grew rapidly with a team of engineers in each State investigating research from the USA and UK and applying it locally to make concrete easier to use, and promoting new uses.

In 1972, Verge accepted an offer from Bill Brown to run the Sydney office of a joint venture between his Melbourne company and Harris & Sutherland. This latter company was in the process of constructing the Alford's Point Bridge, which was a new concept in function design in pre-stressed concrete. As well as bridgework projects, the company built water towers and tanks, and won a tender to build a 7 million gallon tank at Alice Springs using a thin-wall concrete design.

In 1974 a colleague, John Reid, approached him to discuss the possibilities of introducing reinforced earth construction. A French invention, this process made use of granular soils as a structural material by its reinforcement with ribbed steel straps. After a trip to France to investigate the design criteria, the NSW Department of Main Roads accepted this process and over the next 15 years, more than 300 structures were completed.

Verge designed and constructed 500 cyclone-proof concrete houses for PDC Constructions in Darwin, after Cyclone Tracy (*insertion of the date will help future researchers*). He also won a contract to build 15,000 flats in 130 high-rise buildings for the Singapore Government, in association with PDC Constructions (*when was this?*), later called White Constructions after a take-over.

He then (*when?*) joined the Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators Australia after nomination by Bill Brown and began a career in dispute resolution, acting as arbitrator or referee dealing with complex issues of defective buildings and structures, failures and contractual disputes about civil works, buildings and professional practice. He has mediated the resolution of some dozen disputes dealing with design and construction defects, contract administration and claims for damages, and as a technical expert has advised and/or given evidence in the Supreme Court on some 50 matters concerning a wide range of issues on civil and structural engineering projects.

During this period (*Can you clarify what this means? Is it that he was involved with the construction of these or are they projects on which he arbitrated? I presume the latter. If so, delete the following 'other'*), other projects included hotels in Cronulla and Manly; Seagulls Club at Tweed

Heads; TAFE college Gympie; numerous medium span road and rail bridges in NSW and the Northern Territory; arterial roads 70,000 sq. m (*this is an unusual method of measuring roads - can this statement be clarified?*) South Melbourne; numerous reinforced earth retaining walls, bridge abutments, grade separation works, and mining structures; water towers and tanks some of them in Alice Springs; a steel oil tank in Darwin; ; Roll-on-Roll-Off (Ro-Ro) wharf and fishing berth Darwin; southern promenade, water feature and foundations for large flagpole Darling Harbour, Sydney; construction services concerned with jack up floating pile driving rig and lift-up water towers in Darwin; deloading trusses and temporary works for the Pyrmont Bridge restoration; investigations into cracks and leaks in high rise office buildings; corrosion and cracks in multistorey concrete car parks; façade retention systems for heritage buildings; seismic and cyclone resistance of systems buildings; patented retaining wall technology; and prefabricated structures.

*(What happened next? Was he still working as an arbitrator when we interviewed him or had he retired? This leaves the reader 'up in the air')*

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Prepared by Jill Willis, March 2003 from oral history interview conducted on 22.10.98